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SUBJECT: CHRISTIANITY GAINING POPULARITY IN XINJIANG, EVEN
AMONG UIGHURS

REF: BEIJING 11606

Classified By: Classified by Acting Political Internal Unit Chief
Susan Thornton. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

11. (C) Interest in Christianity is growing in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR), but local authorities are reportedly trying to control the growth in order to avoid conflicts with the majority Muslim community. According to local Christian leaders and congregants, the community's growth is largely due to increasing demand for satisfaction of spiritual needs, particularly among young people, who represent the largest percentage of new converts. The local Government, however, has denied permission for the operation of a Christian Sunday school in Urumqi because it fears angering local Muslims, who are prohibited from providing religious education to minors. While most converts are Han Chinese, there is growing interest in Christianity among Uighurs, who are careful to practice quietly in order to avoid retribution from disapproving fellow Muslims. End Summary.

Xinjiang Christian Community Continues to Grow

12. (C) Christianity is attracting new believers in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR), particularly in the capital Urumqi, various contacts told Poloffs during a late May visit to the XUAR. (Note: The term Christianity in Chinese denotes Protestantism and in our conversations did not include Xinjiang's small Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox communities. End Note.) Pastor Fan Chenguang of the Mingde Street Church, the oldest and largest of Urumqi's 17 churches, founded in the 1940s, asserted that there are approximately 20,000 Christians in the city and 100,000 in all of Xinjiang. The government's Xinjiang-wide statistic of 60,000 does not take into account worshippers at house churches, which are increasing because there are not enough authorized churches to accommodate the needs of the growing community, Fan stated.

13. (C) The local government has attempted to limit the spread of Christianity and the establishment of new churches out of fear that the growth could antagonize Xinjiang's large Muslim population, Pastor Fan explained. Nonetheless, Christianity is becoming increasingly popular in predominately Uighur Muslim Southern Xinjiang. She estimated that there are nearly ten thousand Christians in Korla, several thousand in Aksu and even a small community in the Uighur cultural capital, Kashgar, although Kashgar's

Christians worship exclusively in house churches. Urumqi's Christian community has helped and donated money to these smaller communities for the construction of churches and other activities, Fan noted. Elder congregants have been especially generous in their contributions to Christian causes.

¶4. (C) Pastor Fan and other contacts attributed the growth in Xinjiang's Christian community to an increasing recognition of unmet spiritual needs, especially among those between the ages of 20 and 40. In addition to the 4,000 participants in Mingde's two Sunday services, approximately 500 congregants attend the church's Tuesday evening youth study sessions. Two-thirds of the 200 baptisms performed each year are for relatively young converts. A mid-20s broadcaster on Xinjiang Radio, Zhou Jianfeng (protect), told Poloffs that he has witnessed a several-fold increase in the number of church goers each Sunday since he became a Christian four years ago. While remarking that he does not advertise his faith in his workplace, a state-sponsored news station, Zhou stated that he also does not conceal his Christian beliefs.

¶5. (C) Asked if minors below the age of 18 are permitted to attend prayers or other church activities, Fan stated that a few children accompany their parents to Sunday services. The government, however, has not approved the church's requests to operate a Sunday school for children. The government prohibits religious education for Muslim youth under 18, so it fears that allowing the church to run a Sunday school would anger local Muslims.

BEIJING 00011753 002.2 OF 002

Some Uighurs Attracted to Christianity

¶6. (C) Although most Christian converts are Han Chinese, there are more Uighurs practicing or becoming interested in Christianity, Pastor Fan observed. The church "protects the identity" of Uighur Christians, for fear that they will be targeted or harmed by other Uighurs who strongly disapprove of fellow Muslims converting to Christianity. Most Uighur Christians attend house prayers, although some visit the Mingde Church to purchase Bibles, she said.

¶7. (C) One Uighur resident of Korla, capital of the Bayingolin Mongolian Autonomous Prefecture, told Poloffs that she attends prayers in the home of a few American English instructors from the Korla Teachers' College. This nursing school student noted that "many students" attend these weekly prayers. Many of Urumqi's foreign teachers are proselytizing quietly and holding prayer sessions in their homes, Fan remarked. Foreign Christians occasionally attend Mindge's services, but the church must apply for official permission if a foreigner wishes to address the congregation. UK Save the Children Xinjiang Program Manager Mark Jenkins (protect), who often travels to small cities in Southern Xinjiang, commented that local authorities appear to turn a blind eye to low profile religious activities of foreign Christian missionaries, most of whom work locally as English teachers for very low or no pay.

Korla Reacts to Unauthorized Christian Activities

¶8. (C) Bayingolin Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission Deputy Director Lei Xianliang reported that most of the prefecture's 2,250 Protestants reside in Korla and that the city is served by two churches and three designated Christian "activity centers." (Note

the disparity between the official figure and Pastor Fan's estimate of nearly 10,000 Christians in Korla.) Korla only has 220 Catholics and one Catholic activity center. While asserting that Korla has not experienced any significant "religious turmoil" in the past 20 years, Lei remarked that the city has encountered some problems with unauthorized Christian teaching and prayer activities, especially given the growth in the Christian population since the late 1990s. Therefore, the government established a three-pronged program of designating specific Christian venues, congregations and community leaders. Korla also set up a local branch of the official Three-Self Patriotic Movement to better manage the community's Christian affairs.

19. (C) Asked about a media report that Korla officials broke up 2005 Christmas services, Lei contended that the report was not completely accurate. Some proselytizers from outside Korla, including from Hong Kong, South Korea and the United States, came to the city last Christmas and organized an unauthorized service in a hotel, he stated. Christmas activities must be held in a designated religious venue and not in a public place, such as a hotel. Authorities dispersed but did not punish any of the participants, Lei maintained. He also asserted that while single families are permitted to pray in non-designated venues, such as the home, they cannot invite outsiders to partake in the service.

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